

Chapter 5

Participant Observations

During RESPONSE 98, the players commented on both the substance of the findings and on the exercise process. These observations were captured from a variety of questionnaires and comment forms both during the exercise and after the critique session held on the final day. This chapter summarizes the information supplied by participants from Regions I and II and from FEMA Headquarters.

REGION I:

- The majority of the RESPONSE 98 participants stated that the exercise contributed significantly to their emergency response preparedness. Players stressed that they gained an increased understanding of the entire response process by observing the other Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) staff at work in the Regional Operations Center (ROC). Participants noted that cross training would increase the Region's capabilities for disaster response in the future. Additional multi-level exercises were recommended to ensure that all staff could become familiar with response activities. State staffs were particularly pleased to have the opportunity to become more familiar with the operation of the ROC and the *Federal Response Plan*.

ROC Procedures

- An important exercise outcome was the improvement in ROC procedures, systems, and processes that resulted from preparations for play in the exercise. Participants wanted to use more problem-solving discussions during the exercise so that corrective actions could begin immediately. The exercise established a baseline for improvements that should be continued through additional tabletop exercises at Regional Interagency Steering Committee (RISC) meetings, to work out details of standard operating procedures for the ROC.
- Additional computers, telephones, and administrative support would have improved the ROC operation. Participants agreed that the performance by both the Emergency Operations Center in the States and the ROC were effective. This was due primarily to the teamwork and excellent individual performance of participants. An observation was made that in a "real-world" emergency, much of the work done during this exercise at the ROC would have been transferred to the Disaster Field Office (DFO); therefore additional computers, telephones, and administrative support would not be required in the ROC. However, it is cost effective to train staff in the use of the equipment and ROC procedures and to ensure that all systems are working well until the DFO takes over.

- The alert system, responsible for notifying players, functioned well for most staff reporting to the ROC. Procedures for activation of the Civil Air Patrol were not followed as planned and should be reviewed.
- In the future, the Operations staff should brief the public information officer prior to mock press conferences so that all responses will be accurate. Resumption of situation reports would have helped ensure that participants were informed.
- The weather forecast procedures and capabilities need updating to ensure that the capability to receive reports from each office exists by way of a dedicated line. Additional information about the Geographical Information Systems (GIS) capabilities is needed at the ROC. The GIS is a valuable tool that, if used by the Regions and States, will increase response capabilities.

Team Work

- Teamwork and interactions, especially with ROC member counterparts in the States and at the national level, were listed as some of the most positive aspects of RESPONSE 98. Exercise artificialities delayed the flow of information to various participant levels. The State participants were unavailable to supply essential data in a timely manner, and this affected damage assessments that led to requests for Federal assistance.
- State participants felt that the key learning experience for them was a broader understanding of the level and type of detail required by Federal decision-makers in order to respond to States' needs. A suggestion was made to use Regional Interagency Steering Committee (RISC) meetings to provide specific examples of the type of requests appropriate for the ESFs. These discussions would increase awareness at the State and local levels for the types of assistance States can expect from the Federal level, as well as the time it takes to receive such assistance. A specific example cited is the Initial Response Resource (IRR) Package that may be deployed in anticipation of a catastrophic disaster and pre-positioned at a Federal facility. States need to be aware that receipt of an IRR Package depends upon assessment of State resource capabilities and shortfalls. Therefore, the Regional Director and ROC Director need to make this assessment quickly so a request can be made early to deploy the IRR. This is the only way to ensure that States have the material immediately after the disaster occurs.

Exercise Process/Design

- The exercise orientation and start-up briefings provided excellent background information and set the stage so that the size and scope of the exercise was

well understood and the objectives and guidelines for play were clear. However, some participants felt too much time was spent on generalities and review of FEMA policies and procedures. These players wanted to know ROC and ESF team procedures and how to use telephones, e-mail, and facsimile. Much seemed to depend on the varying levels of previous training of each player.

- Participants wanted to see more use of videos in future exercises and wanted all the ESFs and the State and Federal levels working together to ensure that interactions can be tested. Brief update meetings throughout the day were viewed as an effective way to accomplish this goal.

REGION II

RESPONSE 98 contributed significantly to emergency response preparedness in Region II and was viewed by the key players as by far the most challenging exercise they had experienced. It was further indicated that the exercise exposed more strengths and weaknesses than had been found during actual disasters because the scenario was catastrophic. Most participants indicated that when shortfalls occurred, they were usually corrected. Participants stated that the inclusion of Canadian players increased the usefulness of the exercise and its realism.

Team Work

- Participants indicated RESPONSE 98 was a positive learning experience, and the exercise afforded them the opportunity to see the Federal and State levels of ESFs working together. Several regretted that more of their staff could not be participants as it was an excellent training vehicle. Especially helpful were the discussions about specific disaster procedures such as how to document requests for funds. Players came away with a greater understanding of the damage assessment process and of the level of specificity required in requests for assistance.

ROC Procedures

- Region II participants wanted more telephones and computers, meeting rooms, and daily updates in the ROC. Most agreed that an extensive orientation to the new Region II ROC before the exercise began would have been helpful. Although the ROC communications system worked well, it would have been beneficial to have action-tracking software to keep the latest status available. They graded the ability of the Region II ROC to meet deadlines as “effective” and said that the exercise provided insight into ROC operations and was a particularly effective way for non-FEMA responders to learn about FEMA procedures.

- A number of recommendations to improve the functioning of the ROC were made, ranging from posting information about meetings and heightened security arrangements to ongoing updates of vital disaster information displayed on the walls. The adequacy of the ROC as a facility was demonstrated during the exercise, although crowded conditions and noise were noted as needing attention. All players wanted to see the ROC tested again along with the relocation decision-making process.

Exercise Process/Design

- The orientation provided at the beginning of the exercise received high marks by the participants. Receipt of the player handbook prior to the exercise would have helped understanding of the objectives. The controllers and evaluators related well to the participants and did not interfere with exercise activities. More exercises that include all levels of response -- headquarters, emergency support teams, emergency support function agencies, regions, States and locals -- were recommended in the future.
- Several participants wanted to see more directed injects from State teams. This desire for more State play would lend greater realism to the exercise effort and provide more accurate information. Requests for more robust State play were echoed by numerous comments in a variety of ways. Future exercises should also include recovery as the primary scenario. It was also suggested that a daily critique be held so that corrective actions could be put into the next day's responses.

FEMA HEADQUARTERS

Most participants indicated that the coordination and consultation during the 18-month pre-exercise activity significantly improved the likelihood of an effective Federal response to a major disaster event threatening the U.S. Northeast coast and the Canadian Provinces. Relationships developed between the Canadian and U.S. participants at the State, Provincial, and local levels in preparation for RESPONSE 98 bore fruit during the winter ice-storms prior to the conduct of the exercise.

Follow-up Actions

- The recommendation to create a Housing Task Force as a way to adjudicate extraordinary housing requirements in a large disaster, especially across multiple regions and States, appears to merit further study.
- Mechanisms and procedures to use foreign Urban Search and Rescue assets need to be developed and promulgated so that smooth transfers can occur.

- When more than one State is impacted by a disaster, it may be useful to have a regional plan for resource allocations.
- RESPONSE 98 provided further evidence that the Emergency Management Assistance Compacts between States have great value and should be enhanced and expanded nationwide.
- Communications among the ESF, the ROCs, and the ERT-A are at best complex and can become confused. Additional training for the Headquarters and the regional staffs would smooth the process.

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